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Consuming children: an analysis of Australian press coverage of the claims and counterclaims of advocacy and industry groups in relation to a proposed ban on 'junk food' advertising

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Consuming children: an analysis of Australian press coverage of the claims and counterclaims of advocacy and industry groups in relation to a proposed ban on 'junk food' advertising

Abstract

Evidence of rising rates of overweight and obesity in Australia has generated considerable discussion about potential policy responses and solutions. In relation to childhood obesity, one suggestion that has been put forward is to ban or restrict junk food advertising to children. Debate about the merits of such a proposal was an enduring issue in the Australian press during our study's time frame, January 2008-January 2009. This paper is one part of a larger project investigating the reporting and portrayal of overweight and obesity in the Australian media, and the lived experiences of overweight and obese adults. In Australia, O'Hara (2006) notes the significant increase in reports on obesity from 141 articles in 2000 to 2,900 in 2004 in major metropolitan daily newspapers. Children have by no means escaped this increasing media interest in the causes and consequences of overweight and obesity and coverage has kept pace with the growing concern about this particular group. One study identified more than 5,000 articles related to childhood overweight and obesity between 2000 and 2005, with restrictions on television food advertising making an appearance during this time as an important solution to the problem (Udell & Mehta, 2008).

Keywords

counterclaims, claims, coverage, press, australian, analysis, advertising, food, junk, ban, proposed, children, relation, consuming, groups, industry, advocacy

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CONSUMING CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN PRESS COVERAGE OF THE CLAIMS AND COUNTERCLAIMS OF ADVOCACY AND INDUSTRY GROUPS IN RELATION TO A PROPOSED BAN ON ‘JUNK FOOD’ ADVERTISING¹

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Introduction

Evidence of rising rates of overweight and obesity in Australia has generated considerable discussion about potential policy responses and solutions. In relation to childhood obesity, one suggestion that has been put forward is to ban or restrict junk food advertising to children. Debate about the merits of such a proposal was an enduring issue in the Australian press during our study's time frame, January 2008–January 2009.

This paper is one part of a larger project investigating the reporting and portrayal of overweight and obesity in the Australian media, and the lived experiences of overweight and obese adults. In Australia, O'Hara (2006) notes the significant increase in reports on obesity from 141 articles in 2000 to 2,900 in 2004 in major metropolitan daily newspapers. Children have by no means escaped this increasing media interest in the causes and consequences of overweight and obesity and coverage has kept pace with the growing concern about this particular group. One study identified more than 5,000 articles related to childhood overweight and obesity between 2000 and 2005, with restrictions on television food advertising making an appearance during this time as an important solution to the problem (Udell & Mehta, 2008).

Conceptual framework and literature overview

In the tradition of media effects research 'junk food' advertising is one of many types of media representation that has attracted concerns about its potentially deleterious effects on children. There is a significant body of research into the effects of advertising on children, particularly the effects of 'junk food' advertising on television, which has been accompanied by public debate and policy

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discussion in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. In outlining the dimensions of public debate on the issue in Australia, Sinclair and Wilken (2007) suggest that medical bodies and advocacy groups are lined up against the corporate interests of food advertisers, their agencies and the media.

Livingstone (2005, 2006) says that evidence for the effectiveness of various policy proposals in relation to obesity is scarce and further research is required. Gard (2007) also stresses that to date researchers have not produced clear courses of action that policy makers can use to justify their actions in relation to obesity. He also reminds us that while it is important for policy to be guided by the best available evidence, debates about obesity are also waged at an ideological level. He says the spectre of the 'nanny state' has emerged in debates about childhood and adult obesity policy in Britain, Canada and Australia — a reflection of the ideology that favours individual responsibility for regulating behaviour rather than government enforced regulation.

Tingstad (2007) suggests the concept of 'moral panic' (Crichton, 2006) provides a valuable way of analysing the discourses on childhood and obesity and that panics about childhood, of which obesity is one, feed off and into each other and are often underpinned by a conception of children as 'blank slates'. A similar observation has been made about the recurrent assumption that children constitute a special group uniquely vulnerable to media messages evident in discussions of the relationship between children and the media (Sinclair & Wilken, 2007). It is this assumption that underpins the frequent calls for restrictions or bans on advertising to children.

Buckingham (2005, p. 6) suggests the construction of the child that continues to dominate public debate on children and the media is that of the 'incompetent child — the child that is too immature, too irrational, too inexperienced, too cognitively undeveloped, to know what is happening or to be able to resist it'. Kim and Willis (2007) suggest that much of the media's focus on issues of childhood overweight and obesity has been on blaming 'junk food' advertising and unhealthy school lunches, which they say reflects the common conception of children as the innocent victims of social environments.

In a content analysis of a sample of US newspaper coverage O'Neal (2008) found that physical activity and poor nutrition were the major causes to be discussed. In terms of blame, the marketing industry was predominant, and organisations whose work included obese children were most likely to blame marketing of 'junk food'. In their study of US newspaper and television coverage of obesity, Kim and Willis (2007) found that while the food industry was the most frequently mentioned societal cause in their sample of media coverage, schools and education were most often mentioned as having the responsibility of solving the problem.

In their study of Australian press coverage of proposed restrictions on television advertising as a solution to childhood obesity Udell and Mehta (2008) identified a polarised debate between health professionals and the Federal Government and industry. They found that supporters of a ban argue that: the advertising contributes to childhood obesity; food advertisements contradict healthy eating messages; current regulations are not working; young children are vulnerable to exploitation; parents deserve support to educate their children; and restricting the advertisements needs to be part of a multi-strategy approach. Opponents, they found, argue that: advertisements are not the cause of childhood obesity; a ban is not the solution; television stations need the income; a ban would be an impingement on commercial freedom of speech; and that Australians don't want more regulation. They note that despite opposition to a ban the media has played an important role in keeping the issue on the public agenda.

Research questions

Our study seeks to address two interrelated research questions: How is the relationship between 'junk food' advertising and childhood obesity represented by the news media and various claims

makers? What are the meanings being presented to audiences about ‘junk food’, ‘junk food’ companies and the causes of and solutions to childhood obesity in these stories?

Methodology

The Factiva database was used to collect all substantive stories about childhood obesity between 1 January 2008 and 31 January 2009 in *The Australian*, *The Age*, *Herald Sun*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Courier Mail*, *Adelaide Advertiser* and *The West Australian*. News items were then manually retrieved from the newspapers. We identified 265 items ranging from news stories to editorials and opinion pieces. Of these, stories about a proposed ban on junk food advertising accounted for 73 stories, more than any other topic.

Methodologically, the analysis is guided by media framing theory, which recognises the important role of news frames in the construction of social problems and in alerting audiences to certain explanations and courses of actions at the expense of others (Entman, 1993). It is a useful approach to analysing media texts (Van Gorp, 2007) and for identifying the way in which various stakeholders frame policy issues. Our analysis focuses on the sources of news stories, the meanings generated by claims-makers and the reporting devices used in news stories to frame the issues. In analysing the newspaper coverage we were not so much concerned with the quantitative aspects of the data as with the meanings generated by journalists and sources on the issue. Our presentation of the study’s findings is structured around the prominent and enduring themes to emerge in the coverage.

Findings

Simple solution to a complex problem

In seeking to downplay their responsibility for childhood obesity opponents of a ban on ‘junk food’ advertising argue that it is a simple solution to a complex problem and that there is insufficient evidence for a link or for the effectiveness of bans. Industry bodies deployed this and related strategies in a feature story in *The Australian* (11 February 2008, p. 34) headlined ‘Advertisers angry as state goes fat-out to fight child obesity’. The lead reported that:

Commercial television representatives have attacked a threat by the South Australian Government to ban junk food advertising to children as a knee-jerk reaction to childhood obesity concerns.

Reflecting a familiar conflict frame the headline and lead pits advertisers against the government’s efforts to ‘fight childhood obesity’. But the body of the story did not bear out the anger of advertisers, instead revealing that the SA government could just as easily have been depicted as attacking advertisers.

The story reported that the SA Health Minister John Hill had called on advertisers to voluntarily restrict advertising and he was quoted as saying: ‘If they fail to do this, the state government is prepared to go it alone and introduce our own ban on these ads if all else fails’. The national Sales Director for the Seven Network was quoted as saying: ‘Obesity is a complex problem ... A knee jerk reaction like this will make absolutely no impact’. In contrast, the SA Health Minister was quoted as saying:

With SA figures showing one in five of our state’s four-year-olds is either overweight or obese, and similar figures across Australia, these big (food) companies need to take action and be part of the campaign to stop the escalating obesity crisis.

The Minister’s choice of language in this quote (‘crisis’, ‘escalating’) to describe childhood obesity can be seen to exaggerate the extent of the problem and the urgency with which action is needed. It represents a strategy available to proponents of a ban on ‘junk food’ advertising to garner support for their arguments and, as the above excerpt shows, to depict opponents of a ban as part of the

problem if they fail to take action. References to an ‘epidemic’ of childhood obesity are used in a similar way by proponents of a ban.

Advertisers were depicted as co-operating with the Australian Communications and Media Authority’s (ACMA) inquiry and taking a conciliatory approach. The executive director of the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), Collin Segelov, was quoted as saying that ‘Ad bans have yet to cure obesity anywhere, so it’s difficult to see why South Australia would be any different’. His reference to ‘cure obesity’ reinforces the advertising industry’s claim that it is a simple solution to a complex problem.

Necessary measure to reduce rates of childhood obesity

Calls by campaigners for a ban on ‘junk food’ advertising on television have frequently been presented by campaigners and, through them, the press as a means by which to reduce rates of childhood obesity. This framing effectively results in the food and advertising industries being presented as responsible for children’s health. In March headlines of stories about calls for a total ban on ‘junk food advertising’ between certain hours included:

‘Push for radio and TV ban on junk food ads’ (*Sunday Age*, 16/3/08, p. 2)

‘Bid for global ban on TV ads’ (*The Sunday Mail*, Qld, 16/3/08, p. 21)

‘Junk food faces ban — No more ads on TV’ (*Sunday Telegraph*, 16/3/08, p. 37)

‘Junk food ‘blackout’ (*The Sunday Mail*, SA, 16/3/08, p. 24)

‘Junk food ad ban call’ (*The Advertiser*, 17/3/08, p. 14)

Choice’s framing of the issue dominated the stories with each of them presenting the proposed ban as a ‘bid’ to reduce childhood obesity. Banning ‘junk food’ advertising was positioned as the kind of urgent action necessary to stop rising rates of obesity. For example, *The Sunday Age* lead paragraph made a direct link between a ban and a reduction in rates of childhood obesity, which is attributed to the consumer organisation Choice:

Choice is calling for a total ban on junk-food advertising on television between 6am and 9pm to reduce rising rates of obesity among children.

Other bodies such as the Cancer Council, the Obesity Policy Coalition and the Parents Jury are also reported to echo the calls for a ban. It reported that Choice would also like a ban on the use of celebrities, cartoon characters and free gifts as inducements to eat certain foods.

The story reported that a ‘Fairfax analysis’ of free-to-air television found that up to 15 advertisements per hour for ‘fast-food outlets, chocolate and other unhealthy products’ were broadcast during ‘prime viewing slots for children’ and that advertising of these products ‘rose dramatically at times when children were most likely to be viewing’. The results of this monitoring were presented as fact by the journalist and as providing evidence that something must be done by the Choice representative. Statistics on childhood obesity were used to add a sense of urgency to the issue, the extent of the problem and the threat it poses:

One in four Australian children is overweight and obese and experts have warned that the proportion of overweight youngsters could rise to 60% in the next 30 years unless urgent action is taken.

In the context of the story, it is ‘junk food’ advertisers who are positioned as those who need to take action. The story did not mention that the proposed ban would need to be part of a larger strategy. The survey results may have quantified the amount of advertising at certain times but the link between this and childhood obesity is assumed rather than supported by evidence. But the reference to statistics about childhood obesity in stories about a proposed ban on junk food advertising has the effect of naturalising a link.

Commenting on the Fairfax results the food policy officer from Choice said it shows why the ban is needed and that the advertisements are not showing a 'balanced diet'. She sought to convey the perspective of parents on the issue:

Parents are trying to do what is right, but we are making their lives harder by not having legislation on this issue.

In the *Sunday Mail* she was quoted as saying:

Parents are tired of being told it's all their problem when multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns relentlessly market unhealthy food and drinks to their children.

As the above quotes from the Choice representative suggest, children's diets are a battleground in which parents are framed as struggling to cope in the face of an apparently more pervasive and powerful force in the form of fast food companies. The use of 'multimillion-dollar' as a modifier of advertising campaigns emphasises this idea.

The *Sunday Age* story reported that the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) opposed the ban because of a lack of evidence to show that it would work. The Federal Government was reported to have no plans at this stage to change existing regulations and is awaiting a review by ACMA. Nonetheless, questions about the evidence base for the effectiveness of 'junk food' advertising bans were reported much later in the story after the dominant frame establishing a link had already been set. This pattern was played out in stories in other newspapers.

The *Sunday Telegraph* used hyperbole to emphasise the urgency of the issue:

A worldwide blackout on the advertising of junk food and confectionary to children would be introduced under an emergency strategy to tackle the global obesity epidemic.

The journalist's use of language in this lead paragraph ('worldwide blackout', 'emergency strategy' and 'obesity epidemic') functions to exaggerate the nature of the problem, the urgency with which a ban is needed and the likely effect of a ban. The story reported that Australian organisations were joining 115 countries in supporting the 'most hard-line food marketing policy ever'. It detailed the kind of restrictions that would be in place under the new international marketing code, which was to be presented to the Commonwealth Health Minister, Nicola Roxon. It reported that Consumers International, which includes the Australian organisation Choice, is calling for the ban in order to halt childhood obesity rates. Choice representative Clare Hughes appealed to the question of values in emphasising the health implications of the issue:

Obesity is a huge burden on our health system. What's the biggest priority: the future health of Australians or the marketing of junk food?

She referred to research showing that young children were unable to differentiate between 'junk food' advertising and television programs. No details of the research were given. The journalist also used emotive language in describing the relationship between children and 'junk food' advertising, reporting that:

Many of the world's 177 billion overweight children are seduced by an annual \$13 billion worth of junk food and soft drink advertising.

This shows the way in which children are positioned as the passive and vulnerable recipients of 'junk food' advertising and, yet, by implication, they are constructed as consumers of both advertising and 'junk food'. In this story the role of parents was eschewed as 'junk food' advertisers were depicted as having direct entry into the minds and bodies of children. The implication is that junk food companies through their advertising practices are responsible for children's health. No view from the advertising industry was provided.

The *Sunday Mail* also reported that health campaigners were seeking the ban 'in a bid to curb the increase in obesity'. It referred to Choice research showing that 89 per cent of parents wanted restrictions, but no information about how many parents participated in the survey made it difficult

to determine what exactly this figure represents. Significantly the story did include an alternative perspective from a nutritionist who emphasised the responsibility of parents:

Children don't have the money to buy their own food, so it's up to parents to say 'No' when their kids ask for unhealthy products, and to explain why.

This comment contrasted with the Choice representative's emphasis on the powerlessness of parents in the face of unrelenting 'multimillion dollar advertising campaigns'.

It is interesting that the Choice expert said parents were tired of being told that childhood obesity is all their fault, in that this was not supported by the type of media coverage given to the issue during the period that we monitored. On the contrary, coverage consistently blamed environmental factors, such as 'junk food' advertising for childhood obesity and emphasised the difficulties experienced by parents in the face of these factors. As an example, a column in *The West Australian* (5 February 2008, p. 2, Metro) headlined 'Keeping the kids' junk food at bay' reported in the lead:

With childhood obesity rates higher than ever, reining in childrens (sic) diets is a top priority for parents. But identifying junk food can some times be difficult and prising it from a determined child — especially mid-way through a supermarket trip — is a stress most parents would rather avoid.

The referential strategy of 'determined child' functions to support the characterisation of parents as playing a passive role in 'reining in' their children's diets. Emphasis is given to the difficulty parents have in 'prising' junk food from their child and parents are depicted as the passive subjects of children's determined desires for 'junk food'.

Displaces responsibility from where it ought to reside

Proposals to ban 'junk food' advertising provided the impetus for some cynical opinion pieces and columns during our study's timeframe. Often written by regular columnists or representatives of advocacy bodies these stories attempt to put the issue into perspective. *The Age* (23 March 2008, p. 17) published an opinion piece critical of the proposed bans. Headlined 'Nanny state ad bans won't stop kids liking junk food', it was written by Chris Berg, a research fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). He wrote that 'Advertising restrictions are now the coolest new thing for paternalistic policy-makers and their nanny state' and questioned whether people are as easily manipulated by advertising, and in need of protection from it, as proponents of a ban would suggest.

The IPA describes itself as a 'think tank, dedicated to preserving and strengthening the foundations of economic and political freedom' and which 'Supports the free market of ideas, the free flow of capital, a limited and efficient government, evidence-based public policy, the rule of law and representative democracy' (IPA website). The general thrust of this kind of argument is that a proposed ban attaches too much power to advertisers and gives too little credence to individual responsibility and the importance of self-discipline.

A similar position was taken in an editorial in *The Australian* (19 May 2008, p. 9) headlined 'More nanny state — Parents can't expect government to do everything', which emphasised personal and parental responsibility over that of government regulation in relation to childhood obesity:

Keeping junk food out of the mouths of children is the responsibility of parent's (sic) who must decide what food is appropriate and what is not. ... If parents don't like the advertisements their children are watching on television, they should turn it off and order their children outside to play.

A similar theme was evident in a column in Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* (7 September 2008, p. 40), which emphasised some of the factors that are sidelined in a simplistic debate about the pros and cons of a ban on television advertising of junk food, such as how 'consumption' of television and television advertising fit into children's lives and the other activities they engage in. The columnist

suggested that an alternative to banning junk food advertisements would be to ‘turn off the TV, get the kids outside, run around with them and give them some fresh fruit and a drink of water’.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum are those who emphasise that the efforts and thus responsibility of parents to control their children’s diets are being undermined by the ‘junk food’ industry and its advertising.

Parents being undermined by industry

The results of a survey conducted by *Newspoll* for *Choice* magazine provided the impetus for a series of news stories on May 19. Headlines included:

‘Fed up with kids’ junk food ads’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 5)

‘Parents angry at food ads’ (*The Daily Telegraph*, p. 5)

‘Big majority of parents want junk food ads banned’ (*The Australian*, p. 5)

‘Parents fed up with junk food ads’ (*The Advertiser*, p. 9)

‘Parents put bite on junk food ads’ (*The Courier Mail*, p. 12)

The stories reported on the survey’s finding that 82% of respondents wanted laws to curtail the marketing of foods high in fat and sugar. They included comments from the chief executive of *Choice* who was reported to be calling on the federal government to take notice of and to act on the survey. In accordance with the survey results, ‘junk food’ advertising was framed as responsible for undermining parents’ attempts to develop healthy eating habits in their children, a familiar frame adopted by *Choice* and other proponents of a ban.

Significantly, only *The Sydney Morning Herald* linked the survey to the issue of obesity, reporting that it came as a House of Representatives inquiry into obesity increased its deadline for submissions. It also emphasised the limitations of the survey’s findings, such as that it did not show whether parents would support a total ban. Indeed, the chief executive of *Choice* was reported as saying that this is unlikely to be the case. However, *Choice*’s executive director, Peter Kell, was quoted as saying that what it does show is that parents ‘feel their messages for healthy eating are being undermined at every turn by the relentless number of junk food ads’.

The Sydney Morning Herald story was also the only one to include an alternative perspective on the survey results, which was provided by the executive director of the Australian Association of National Advertisers. Collin Segelov was reported to have dismissed the poll because of its small sample size and skewed questions. He countered the *Choice* survey with reference to his own organisation’s research showing that parents blame themselves first (for their children’s eating habits) followed in descending order by schools, governments and food manufacturers. The story also revealed another strategy available to opponents of a ban, which is to undermine the methods and put the emphasis on *Choice*’s own interest in framing findings so as to garner support for their cause.

Stories in the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Advertiser* and *Courier Mail* reported on the survey’s results and *Choice*’s calls for the government to take notice. The only sources they used were representatives of *Choice* and, thus, no alternative perspective was provided. In *The Advertiser* *Choice* Food Policy officer Clare Hughes was quoted as saying:

Parents are telling us that they’re sick of their efforts being undermined by the marketing of multinational companies.

The story in *The Australian* was lengthier because it included comments from a parent and a spokeswoman for community group, The Parents Jury, both of whom backed the calls for tighter regulation on ‘junk food’ advertising.

Conveying the image of responsible corporate citizenship

Another dimension of the media debate relates to corporate responsibility as industry groups adopt of a strategy of managing their image in relation to concerns about childhood obesity. A story in *The Australian* (26 June 2008, p. 35) headlined 'Food ads must show goodwill' reported that the executive director of the AANA, Collin Segelov, said there is a growing sense within the industry that 'consumers needed to be given a sign they were taking the debate over the role of advertising in the obesity issue seriously' ... 'regardless of the rights and wrongs levelled at its advertising'.

In stories of this kind industry spokespeople seek to distance themselves from the idea that any action they take on the issue is an admission of responsibility but they tend to be framed by the media and by opponents of a ban as just that. As an example stories about an initiative of the Australian Food and Grocery Council the Responsible Children's Marketing Initiative headlined 'Junk ads ban on kids' TV (*The Advertiser*, October 24, p. 3) and 'Junk food ad bans' (*Herald Sun*, October 24, p. 3) reported that under the initiative some of the largest food and drink regulators would only allow healthy food to be advertised during peak children's viewing hours. While the initiative was reported to be a response to community concern about the prevalence of junk food advertising, the chief executive of the Council was said to have refused to draw a link between the advertising and obesity.

A story in the *Daily Telegraph* (3 November 2008, p. 5) headlined 'Pulling plug on junk food' reported that hamburger chains and fast food companies are considering a plan to remove junk food ads from children's TV, in a move similar to the 'landmark move' announced by the Food and Grocery Council. The lead said the plan was 'to help fight childhood obesity'. The Coalition on Food Advertising to Children is reported to have applauded the industry's decision and was quoted as saying 'Finally they are waking up and not denying any problem with what they're doing'. This reflects the way in which when an issue has been one of ongoing debate proponents of a policy initiative, such as that of greater controls on junk food advertising, can position their opponents voluntary measures as evidence of a backdown or admission of guilt or responsibility.

While proponents of a ban argue that junk food advertising undermines healthy eating messages, its opponents have also attempted to make the same argument in emphasising the responsible role they play in promoting health eating messages. A story in *The Australian* (3 November 2008, p. 37) headlined 'Maccas: healthy message at risk' reported on claims by McDonald's spokespeople that proposed bans could pose a threat to the company's ability to promote healthy lifestyles and diets to children. It is interesting to note the preparedness of the industry to recognise its influence when it comes to promoting positive health messages and being part of the solution but its reluctance to assume responsibility for the role it might play in the problem.

Ban a threat to children's television

Another tactic used by the advertising industry in opposing a ban is to suggest that it has the potential to do more harm than good if advertisers have to find new and more ways of promoting their products. In one story in *The Age* (16 March 2008, p. 2) headlined 'Push for radio and TV ban on junk food ads' the executive director of AANA said that food companies would drop their prices to boost sales lost through an advertising ban and that this might increase consumption. He also questioned the strength of the evidence for a link between 'junk food' advertising and childhood obesity and was quoted as saying that a ban is too simplistic and wouldn't have any effect.

The *Herald Sun* (18 July 2008, p. 5) in a story headlined 'Junk food ad ban threat to kids shows' reported on warnings from industry group Free TV Australia to a parliamentary inquiry that 'children's programs will be axed if the Federal Government backs a ban on junk food advertising'. It reported that parents and health groups want the advertisements banned 'to fight childhood obesity'. Free TV emphasised that the voluntary codes already in place were sufficient and that the ban in the UK had resulted in a significant cost to the industry.

The role of 'epidemic' talk in the debate

Suggestions that there is an 'epidemic' of childhood obesity provide an important context for the debate about banning junk food advertising. Proponents of a ban often make reference to an 'epidemic' of childhood obesity in order to add a sense of urgency to their calls for action. For example, in an opinion piece in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (5 September 2008, p. 17) headlined 'We're getting only weasel words on junk food ads' the senior food policy officer for Choice, Claire Hughes wrote:

In the midst of a childhood obesity epidemic, the regulatory body does not believe it is wrong for children to be bombarded with ads for junk food.

She was responding to ACMA's decision in late August not to impose tougher restrictions on junk food advertising to children. She also said Food Standards Australia and New Zealand had a tool to determine what 'junk food' was, even though ACMA's chairman said there was not one. She again emphasised that parents feel the advertisements are making their job harder.

In contrast, opponents of a ban counteract this with what they say is evidence that there is no epidemic of childhood obesity. A brief story in *The Advertiser* (2 October 2008, p. 2) headlined 'No obesity link' reported that the executive director of the AANA 'has denied' there was no link between food advertising and childhood obesity in comments given to the parliamentary inquiry in Brisbane. He was quoted as saying:

I'm not only arguing that advertising is not the cause of a childhood obesity epidemic, but that there is no epidemic.

Another story in *The Advertiser* (17 November 2008, p. 9) headlined 'Junk food is 'not junk' reported that the AANA has 'tried to downplay the obesity epidemic' on the basis of a Commonwealth study which said that levels of childhood obesity had not changed since 1995. The AANA's chief executive was quoted as saying that the claimed obesity epidemic 'has been exposed as a deliberate attempt at misinformation' and that it would be 'unreasonable and unjust' to impose a ban on television advertising. He said 'there is overwhelming evidence that food and beverages advertising to children is neither the primary nor a significant contributor to childhood obesity'.

Insufficient evidence of a link or effectiveness of bans

The decision in August by ACMA not to restrict 'junk food' advertising to children, on the basis of a lack of evidence, was met with contempt from advocates for a proposed ban. Headlines on 28, 29 and 30 August included:

'Junk food ads to stay: regulator' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 3)

'ACMA to crack down on pester power — but not junk food ads' (*The Australian*, p. 31)

'Obesity 'No link to TV ads'' (*The Advertiser*, p. 12)

'Games stars face ad ban' (*Herald Sun*, 29/08, p. 13)

'Parents want TV restrictions' (*The Advertiser*, 29/8, p. 25)

'Revise no-ban decision: AMA' (*The Advertiser*, 30/8, p. 26)

'Doctors lobby for junk food ad review' (*The Age*, 30/8, p. 5)

The Sydney Morning Herald story described ACMA as delivering a 'victory to the junk food industry by deciding not to impose further restrictions on advertising during children's TV hours'. The decision was reported to have been met with an 'avalanche' of criticism from health and community groups. It reported that the authority's chair 'said the regulator was not a health advisory body' and that an independent review of the research has shown that there is no consensus about whether or not the ban would have an effect on childhood obesity.

It reported that the Chairwoman of the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children and nutritionist Rosemary Stanton disputed the claims and are disappointed by ACMA's decision. The former suggested 'there is little doubt junk food commercials are contributing to the obesity epidemic by encouraging pester power'. The story reported that the Coalition 'has slammed the draft report as a major setback in the battle against childhood obesity'. Rosemary Stanton said the industry would not spend so much money on advertising if it did not believe it had an effect.

The Australian framed its story quite differently by placing the emphasis on the regulator's decision to 'stamp out pester power' which uses popular personalities or cartoon characters. The lead reported that ACMA 'has refused to bow to demands that it fight national childhood obesity epidemic by banning junk food advertising in children's television programs'. ACMA's chairman was quoted as saying if evidence of a link between 'junk food' advertising and obesity was to come forward the regulator would review its position on the issue. He said the regulator had to rely on evidence and that there was not enough at this stage. He emphasised the economic risks of banning ads, including broadcasters not being able to produce children's programs due to a cut in revenue. He also noted the difficulty with identifying high fat, salt and sugar foods was a factor in its decision. Its approach to pester power, on the other hand, was based on evidence that children are easily influenced by characters and celebrities.

In the *Herald Sun* ACMA's chairman was quoted as saying childhood obesity is complex and that there is no consensus on the impact of a ban. In contrast, a spokeswoman for the Obesity Policy Coalition was reported as saying the regulator was failing to protect children and that there is 'plenty of evidence' to suggest a ban is an 'important component of a broad strategy to address overweight and obesity' in children.

In the days to follow a number of other stories and opinion pieces in response to the issue were reported in the press. *The Advertiser* (29 August 2008, p. 25) emphasised parents' and health groups' disappointment with the regulator's decision, accusing it of 'failing to get tough on junk food advertising'. It also reported in a story the following day that the AMA has described the decision as 'unconscionable' and that it will make a submission calling on the regulator to revise its decision. *The Age* (30 August 2008, p. 26) also reported on the ACMA's decision, quoting from the AMA president who said:

I think many people will be shocked to find out that ACMA intends to continue to allow junk food companies to focus their advertising efforts on vulnerable children and young people.

In September coverage of ACMA's decision continued with the addition of a new development in the story in the form of Greens' leader Bob Brown's introduction to the Senate of a Bill to ban 'junk food' and alcohol advertising during peak children's viewing times ('Health crusade — Junk-food TV ads move', *The Advertiser*, 5 September 2008, p. 19; 'Junk food ad ban', *Herald Sun*, 5 September 2008, p. 39). These stories reported that Senator Brown said the Bill was 'aimed at combating childhood obesity'.

Too early to act

In early December the issue was firmly back in the political realm following the Senate's rejection of Senator Brown's Bill. A story in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 December 2008, p. 2) headlined 'No gag on junk food ads: Senate' reported that the major parties have blocked 'attempts to rein in promotion of three big triggers of ills in the community — gambling alcohol and junk food'. It reported that the decision has come 'despite appeals for action from health groups but in the face of intense lobbying from the food and advertising industries'. It is interesting to note here that the actions of health groups are described as 'appeals' whereas those of the food and advertising industry are described as 'intense lobbying'. The descriptors could just as easily be reversed but are used here because the Senate's decision seems to come down on the side of the industry, and to depict health groups as being in a position of relative powerlessness.

The story reported that the chairwoman of the Senate committee said it believed a ban was premature while the national obesity strategy was still being developed. *The Advertiser* (3 December 2008, p. 33) story also reported that the Senate committee deemed it too early to act when companies were attempting to self regulate. Supporters of a ban, on the other hand, including the Greens and critics of industry-led initiatives, are sceptical about the veracity and effectiveness of self regulation.

Discussion

The media plays an important role in framing the problem of childhood obesity and debate about potential policy solutions through the presentation of the views of various stakeholders involved in the debate. Our study has identified aspects of the issue that advocacy and industry groups seek to emphasise and those they seek to downplay. The frames they sponsor, drawing as they do on competing discourses of risk, are a key determinant of how the issue is in turn framed in the media. Our analysis shows that the press has reported both sides of the debate and, while one frame or another may be dominant in individual stories, on the whole the press does not seem to have given weight to one side of the debate over the other.

Evans (2004) argues that dualistic thinking pervades debates about childhood obesity. In many ways this kind of thinking is reinforced in media coverage of proposals to ban junk food advertising to children in that the issue is framed as a conflict between advocacy and industry groups. On the one hand, proponents of a ban emphasise the risk of junk food advertising to childhood obesity and to parents' attempts to control their children's diets. They downplay the claims of industry bodies that there is insufficient evidence of a link or the effectiveness of a ban and that parents should take responsibility for their children's exposure to television and their children's food consumption. Industry bodies on the other hand emphasise the risk a ban would pose to children in the form of restricting television programming and potentially exposing them to more advertising in different mediums.

In the debate about bans on junk food advertising as a solution to childhood obesity parents are portrayed as being at the mercy of large multinational food companies; their attempts to be responsible parents hampered by the marketing campaigns directed at their children by 'junk food' companies. On the other hand, a more active image of parents as having the power and responsibility to regulate their children's diets is invoked by those who oppose a ban. Children also tend to be depicted as lacking agency and especially vulnerable to junk food advertising while at the same time arguments for a proposed ban depend on a conception of children as 'consumers', whether it be of junk food advertising on television or junk food itself. In contrast to Udell and Mehta's (2008) study, which found that parents were often described as responsible for the problem of childhood obesity, this was not a major theme in coverage during our study's timeframe. The idea that parents' efforts were being undermined by junk food advertising was more common.

In terms of the contours of the debate as a whole a couple of observations can be made. Framing the proposed ban as a necessary solution to childhood obesity can result in other causes not being presented in news stories and run the risk of simplifying a complex issue. Furthermore, our analysis tends to confirm the suggestion that critics of junk food advertising pay too little attention to the broader television programme environment and the kind of messages about food and eating depicted in them (Eagle, Bulmer & De Bruin, 2004) as well as different types of food marketing (Sinclair & Wilken, 2007).

The issue of a ban on junk food advertising to children raises broader questions about how children relate to media, the kinds of images, information and products they should be allowed to be exposed to and about their literacy in relation to what they are exposed to in the media. Debates about media policy relating to children invoke broader assumptions and discourses about childhood (Buckingham, 2005) and assumptions about the role of parents, government, industry and regulators in taking responsibility for regulating the messages children are exposed to. One of the dangers in

the public debate about a proposed ban on 'junk food' advertising is that complex issues related to the causes of obesity in children and the way in which children relate to advertising are reduced to dualistic thinking in terms of pro-effects and no-effects.

A great deal of uncertainty surrounds the idea of a causative link between junk food advertising and childhood obesity and the definition of 'junk food' used for the purposes of establishing a link. As Ashton (2004, p. 51) says,

Despite media claims to the contrary, there is no good evidence that advertising has a substantial influence on children's food consumption and, consequently, no reason to believe that a complete ban on advertising would have any useful impact on childhood obesity rates.

This, in effect, mirrors the conclusion that ACMA and the senate committee arrived at in its review of the evidence base and which lobby groups claimed put the interests of industry ahead of the needs of parents and children's health. Similarly, in May 2009 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing released its report *Weighing it up: Obesity in Australia*, which made 20 recommendations in relation to the role of government, industry and community in addressing obesity. Significantly, further government regulation of junk food advertising to children was not one of these, with the report cautiously suggesting that the government should consider regulations if the industry fails to self-regulate (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, 2009, p. xvi). This would suggest that while proponents of a ban have been successful in attracting media attention to their claims they have not been as successful in influencing policy makers.

Conclusion

In the mediated debate about the relationship between 'junk food' advertising and childhood obesity what is being spoken about is not so much a link between the advertising and children's eating habits, but a link to childhood obesity itself. Even if one accepts that 'junk food' advertising on television can and does have some kind of influence on children's decision making and preferences about food and their eating habits, it does not necessarily follow that these decisions and eating habits will cause them to become obese. One of the functions of the debate about junk food advertising that is played out in the media is that it oversimplifies the issues and potentially exaggerates the extent of the obesity problem among children and the role of junk food advertising as a cause. There is considerable scope for media and communication scholars to bring their knowledge to the public debate and to contribute empirical evidence pertaining to children's media and advertising literacy.

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